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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VILNIUS 001353

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/NB, EUR/RPM, AND INR/B

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [LH](#)

SUBJECT: LITHUANIA CONCERNED OVER RUSSIAN AIR INCURSIONS  
AND ATTEMPTS TO DIVIDE NATO

REF: A. USNATO 940

- [B](#). VILNIUS 1350
- [C](#). VILNIUS 987
- [D](#). VILNIUS 845
- [E](#). VILNIUS 305

Classified By: Pol/Econ Officer Trevor Boyd  
for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Lithuania's opposition to hosting a Baltic regional air safety conference under NATO-Russia Council (NRC) auspices (ref A) is rooted in its assessment that Russian policy aims to disrupt NATO relations with its newest members and raise pressure on the air policing mission. Though Russian violations of Lithuanian airspace, once annually numbering in the thousands, have dropped to a handful in recent years, Lithuania remains concerned that its neighbors are violating its airspace to test Lithuania's and NATO's technological ability and diplomatic resolve. In discussions regarding a permanent Baltic air-policing mission, Lithuania will stress the need for NATO assets given its own meager air defense capabilities, highlighting the fact that recent incursions have occurred over the Ignalina nuclear power plant and that NATO aircraft have intercepted suspected Russian intelligence aircraft traversing the Baltic Sea Coast. End Summary.

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Russia's Disruptive Presence  
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[1](#)2. (C) Lithuanian government officials believe that Russian air space violations illustrate that the GOR is unwilling to accept the new NATO reality in the Baltics and would use any NRC discussion on the issue to subvert it. Despite its continued concern over Russian air incursions, Lithuania is not yet ready to support initiatives like the proposed NATO-Russia Council Regional Air Safety Conference (reftel A), fearing that the forum would be used by Russia to create a rift within the NATO alliance. The GOL does not feel it necessary to continue to assuage unfounded Russian concerns over the nature of the Baltic air-policing mission in Brussels or elsewhere.

[1](#)3. (C) Kestutis Jankauskas, Director of MFA's Security Policy Department told us that the GOR would use initiatives like the NRC Conference to "single out" the Baltic region in the belief that NATO itself, by calling for a special conference, believes that there are differences between its new Baltic members and its Western European founders. NATO, he said, affords indivisible security to its members. A Conference focused on the Baltic region, therefore, would add no value to the NATO-Russia relationship, and might, in fact, imply inter-alliance instability to the GOR. Noting the recent visit of a Russian Vienna Document inspection team (reftel B) to the Zokniai airfield and NATO's Baltic air policing assets, Lithuania, Jankauskas said, prefers to work through established CSBM confidence-building instruments to mitigate NATO-GOR tensions rather than create new fora that Russia may exploit to imply there are problems where none exist.

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The History of Violations of Lithuanian Air Space  
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[1](#)4. (SBU) There have been nearly 5,500 recorded violations of Lithuania's airspace by both fixed wing and rotor aircraft since January 1, 1992. Though aircraft from Latvia (on three occasions), the United States (once; a BE-20 flying without proper authorization July 28, 2000), and Sweden (once) have violated Lithuania's airspace, only aircraft from Russia or Belarus have done so since June 2001.

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Summary of Violations of Lithuania's Airspace  
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[1](#)5. (SBU) The Government of Lithuania recorded the following number of violations of its air space:

--1992	2,557 violations
--1993	2,621 violations

--1994	133 violations
--1995	59 violations
--1996	14 violations
--1997	10 violations
--1998	5 violations
--1999	4 violations
--2000	8 violations
--2001	8 violations
--2002	4 violations
--2003	3 violations
--2004	5 violations

16. (SBU) The GOL argues that, in the mid-late 1990s, Lithuania's participation in transatlantic security programs and anticipated membership in NATO were key to discouraging Russian air incursions. They point in particular to Lithuania's joining the PfP in January 1994 to explain the sudden drop of airspace violations from over two thousand to fewer than two hundred. Improvements in Lithuania's ability, both technically and multilaterally, to detect and address incursions into its air space, such as the development of national air sovereignty operations and the 2001 inauguration of the Regional Airspace Surveillance Co-ordination Center in Karmelava, Lithuania, have also discouraged air incursions.

#### ----- Belarus Also a Cause for Concern -----

17. (C) Though many of the most recent violations appear more incidental than directed, as when helicopters have drifted across Lithuania's border for under two minutes, Lithuanians worry that Russia and Belarus undertake targeted incursions to test Lithuania's air detection and defense capabilities. They point in particular to two incursions, in April and June 2003, when aircraft from Belarus violated Lithuanian airspace over the Ignalina nuclear power plant. The Ignalina plant, four miles from the Belarusian border, is Lithuania's only area of restricted airspace, and is only modestly protected against threats from the air by a single platoon of six Swedish-made BOFORS L-70 40mm air defense guns.

#### ----- Surveillance Aircraft Concerns -----

18. (C) Lithuania is concerned about surveillance aircraft moving between Kaliningrad and Russia. A Russian IL-18 traveling to Kaliningrad violated Lithuanian airspace in November 2003. Russia flies modified IL-18 electronic surveillance planes (IL-20 or COOT-A) along the Baltic Sea Coast. Lithuanian interlocutors note that one of the few times NATO's planes scrambled to address a Baltic airspace violation since the Baltic air-policing mission began in March was in response to a likely IL-20 traversing Estonian airspace without a flight plan, in June. The Russian crew, interlocutors stress, only submitted a flight plan after Belgian F-16s had intercepted their aircraft.

#### ----- Limited Domestic Air Defense Assets -----

19. (C) Lithuania lacks the air assets to police and defend its airspace against air incursions on their own. The country's meager national air assets, namely a pair of L-39 Albatross airframes and small helicopter fleet are not night-capable and, therefore, can provide air defense, protect against renegade attack, and assist in civil air emergencies only during daylight.

#### ----- Russian Pressure? -----

10. (C) Russia seems determined, say interlocutors, to play a game of cat and mouse with Lithuania to test the technological ability and diplomatic resolve of the GOL to address violations of its airspace. Even in instances where Russian aircraft are tracked, and air space violations recorded, say interlocutors, the GOR refutes GOL evidence with blanket denials and technical doubletalk. Russian actions lend little credence to the belief that the GOR will ever be more than a disruptive presence in the region.

11. (C) Darius Mereckis of MFA's NATO Division shared with us an official GOR reply to a GOL query about two airspace violations near the Kaliningrad border by Russian military aircraft in May. Russia's diplomatic note denied that any of its aircraft "conducted flights in the airspace of the Kaliningrad Oblast" at the time of the incident. In response to Lithuanian electronic evidence that a Russian AN-26 violated Lithuanian airspace over the Baltic Sea, Russia denied the violation, and said the flight was conducted in accordance with its request and corresponding permit to utilize established air transit routes over Latvia.

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EU Parallels  
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¶12. (C) Lithuanians also claim Russians play a similar game with their relations with the EU, by regularly claiming in EU fora that Lithuania is attempting to disrupt Russian transport links to the Kaliningrad exclave - though objective observers regularly praise the Lithuanian government for scrupulous implementation of the EU-Russia-Lithuanian agreement regulating such transportation.

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Comment  
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¶13. (C) Violations of Lithuania's airspace are rare. Nevertheless, in discussions of a permanent Baltic air policing solution, the GOL will likely play up perceived targeted Russian or Belarusian threats to Lithuania's security; but they would also concede that they don't expect a Soviet air invasion. Such a response are perhaps only natural in response to what the Lithuanians perceive nationalist hostility towards Baltic NATO membership emanating from Russia. Lithuania is ready to play a constructive role within European security mechanisms such as the Vienna Document - as it evidenced in successfully hosting a Russian inspection this week. But it will unlikely agree to putting Baltic security concerns on the agenda of any NATO interaction with Russia until they believe Russia takes obvious steps to back off from what the Lithuanians believe aim to disrupt relations within NATO.

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